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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/MLS, AND H; G FOR FOR DRL, PRM/ANE, AND S/WE; PACOM FOR POLAD

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SUBJECT: REPRESENTATIVE MCCOLLUM MEETS NATIONAL ASSEMBLY LEADERS

REF: A. A) 06 VIENTIANE 0686

- ¶B. B) 06 VIENTIANE 1117
- ¶C. C) 06 VIENTIANE 1232
- ¶D. D) 06 VIENTIANE 1234

Classified By: Ambassador Patricia M. Haslach for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶11. (C) Summary: During her first visit to Laos, Representative Betty McCollum met with a series of senior Lao National Assembly (NA) officials, including Madame Pany Yathotu, NA Vice President as well as member of the ruling party's Politburo, members of the NA's Foreign Affairs Committee, and the NA Chief of Cabinet. The two sides discussed increased cooperation on issues such as unexploded ordnance (UXO) removal, maternal and child health, and education. The only disappointment was Madame Pany's unwillingness to engage on any issue of a political nature including resolving the case of the 26 detained children. End summary.

¶12. (U) The National Assembly (NA) served as the Lao Government host of Representative McCollum's December 21-29 first visit to Laos. On December 26, Representative McCollum held separate meetings with Dr. Koueko Akhamountry, Vice Chairman of the NA's Foreign Affairs Committee, and with Madame Pany Yathotu, member of the Lao communist party Politburo as well as NA Vice President and Deputy Chair of the NA Standing Committee. Joining Dr. Koueko was Ms. Singkham Khomsavan, NA Member from Vientiane Province and also a member of the NA Foreign Affairs Committee, as well as Mr. Amphai Jitmanon, Deputy Chair of the NA's Law Department. Joining Madame Pany in the second meeting were Dr. Thongphan Chanthalanom, NA Member from Sekong Province and Chair of the NA's Women's Parliamentary Caucus (WPC), and Professor Bouanhong Boupha, NA Member from Vientiane Capital and Deputy WPC Chair.

¶13. (U) After the formal meetings with the NA officials, NA Chief of Cabinet and NA Member from Savannakhet Province Thongteun Sayasen hosted a working lunch. The other attendees from the Lao side at lunch were:

Tong Yeu Thor, NA Member from Houaphan Province and Vice President of the Lao Front for National Construction;

Dr. Koueko Akhamountry, NA Member from Savannakhet Province and Vice Chairman of the NA's Foreign Affairs Committee;

Ms. Singkham Khomsavan, NA Member from Vientiane Province and member of the NA Foreign Affairs Committee;

Viengthavisone Thephachanh, Director General of the NA,s Foreign Affairs Department; and

Somchay Paphasiri, Senior Foreign Affairs Specialist, Americas Division, Europe and Americas Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The Dr. Koueko Meeting

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¶4. (SBU) Dr. Koueko, who had met Representative McCollum upon arrival at the airport, welcomed her again and mentioned the National Assembly (NA) was at the end of its 17-day session (to explain why other NA Foreign Affairs Committee members were not present). Koueko noted that NA Members are interested in learning more from the U.S. Congress. Both bodies have similar functions: making laws, oversight of executive branch performance, and making important decisions for the nation. One difference is that the NA has only one branch. Also the NA does not meet continuously throughout the year. The Lao NA is a member of the International Parliamentary Union (IPU) as well as both the 30-member Asian and smaller ASEAN inter-parliamentary organizations.

¶5. (SBU) The NA,s 115 members are divided among six commissions: Legal Affairs; Economics and Finance; Culture and Society; Defense and National Security; Ethnic Affairs; and Foreign Affairs -- the smallest commission with only 13 members. According to Koueko, the Foreign Affairs Commission (FAC) submits draft laws on foreign affairs for NA review, provides its opinion about signing international conventions and treaties, and generally is involved in any aspects of international cooperation including cooperation with parliaments of other countries. The FAC also has oversight of the way the Government of Laos (GOL) carries out its foreign relations.

¶6. (SBU) Since the FAC has so few members, it has invited interested members from other commissions to help develop relations with other countries. Dr. Koueko told Representative McCollum that the NA FAC has established a 17-member Lao-American Parliamentary Friendship Association (LAPFA). Since there was an NA election earlier in 2005, there are many new NA members. Nevertheless, Koueko pointed out, a number of former NA members still help the work of the FAC and LAPFA. (Note: A subsequent list of current NA members who are also members of LAPFA provided the Embassy shows four members of the FAC; three from Legal Affairs; three from Economic Affairs; three from Cultural, one from Defense; and three from Ethnic Affairs. The Embassy plans follow-up activities with this Association.)

¶7. (SBU) As part of its duties of overseeing the way the GOL carries out its foreign relations, the FAC held its own two-day annual meeting just before the NA opened its December session. The FAC invited government representatives, particularly from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), to discuss their work. Dr. Koueko noted that Deputy Prime Minister/Foreign Minister Thongloun Sisoulith is a member of the NA FAC, and he also updated the FAC on the Ministry's activities. The FAC also invited representatives from the courts and prosecutors offices to report on their work. This month,s FAC meeting was the first to be held by any NA commission. In the past, government bodies sent in written reports to NA commissions but did not send officials to meet with the commission members. Koueko noted GOL officials have reported good bilateral cooperation particularly on counter-narcotics and dealing with unexploded ordnance (UXO). Since UXO makes it very difficult to cultivate new land in the eastern half of his home province of Savannakhet, Koueko specifically pushed for more U.S. assistance in this area.

¶8. (SBU) Representative McCollum expressed her pleasure at visiting during Christmas, a time of hope, faith, and joy, and told Koueko her own wish for this holiday season was for a better world for children as we struggle for world peace. She reviewed the separation of power among the three branches of the U.S. government and told him her job includes protecting personal freedom, freedom of religion, and freedom

of trade. The United States has not been perfect in these areas, but "democracies strive to be better." Representative McCollum described services she provides to her constituents as a Member of Congress, from services for veterans, students, and the elderly to help with passport and immigration issues as well as business and trade.

¶9. (SBU) Representative McCollum noted the "new direction" and "different course" which the Congress would be taking as a result of the November 2006 election. As she moves to the Appropriations Committee, Representative McCollum told Koueko she planned to continue to support partnerships with Laos to deal with the issues of remaining unexploded ordnance (UXO), Avian Influenza, and HIV/AIDS among others. Although the United States is not as active in inter-parliamentary bodies as she would like, Representative McCollum pointed out she is part of a parliamentary group which monitors World Bank projects.

¶10. (SBU) Dr. Koueko told Representative McCollum her lessons are particularly important to himself, only a two-term NA member, and to his colleague, Ms. Singkham, in her first five-year NA term. He affirmed that Representative McCollum's visit would spur improved bilateral relations with the United States and said he hoped to see increased cooperation with the U.S. Congress. Representative McCollum said she would return to Washington, D.C. and encourage other Members of Congress to join her in visiting Laos in the next 12-18 months.

... UXO

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¶11. (SBU) Responding to Dr. Koueko's comments on the need to make progress on the UXO issue particularly in his home province, Representative McCollum said that, with a heavy heart, she had visited people injured by UXO, so she understood the importance of working together on the issue. Representative McCollum pointed out that the USG is providing \$5.6 million in UXO assistance and expressed hope this would continue and even increase. She commended UXO Lao, Laos' national mine clearance operator, and the Mine Action Group (MAG) NGO for their close cooperation. Representative McCollum noted that some countries use their foreign aid to build projects and then leave. The United States hopes to create sustainability for the Lao people by building capacity so the people can lead themselves.

¶12. (SBU) Representative McCollum noted that she saw opportunities for the USG to work with the Lao health care system. U.S. medical teams, from their experience in the Iraq war, have developed great expertise in treating these kinds of injuries. She noted that military health care personnel have a unique role in the U.S. defense system. First and foremost their goal is to help people. If an opportunity presents itself, Representative McCollum told Dr. Koueko, she hoped the two governments could undertake a dialogue to fully understand the opportunity available to have these U.S. medical teams train Lao health care personnel to create sustainability here in Laos. The Ambassador mentioned that this had been raised both during the visit of PACOM Admiral Fallon in July 2006 (ref A) as well as during the first U.S.-Lao Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue in October 2006 (ref B). Dr. Koueko responded that, since Deputy Prime Minister/Foreign Minister Thongloun is a member of the NA FAC, the other FAC members will have the opportunity to ask him about this and other issues when they meet.

Madame Pany

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¶13. (SBU) NA Vice President Madame Pany Yathotu, a member of the Lao communist party Politburo and an ethnic Hmong, told Representative McCollum that she saw bilateral relations with the United States improving in a number of areas to include investment and trade numbers, MIA accounting, UXO, counter-narcotics, and counter-terrorism. She was pleased that Representative McCollum had visited Xiang Khouang

Province to see the "real situation" and to see that the GOL was using funding provided by the USG to help with UXO and children's issues.

¶14. (SBU) Madame Pany pointed out for Representative McCollum that the current NA, elected in April 2006, had 29 females among its 115 members, more than 25 percent. The current NA session was discussing a bill on protecting children's rights, and Pany highlighted the contributions of female NA members in this debate as especially important. The NA was also discussing improvements to the Labor Law to better protect the rights and interests of women in Laos. One issue being discussed was amending the law so that women would be allowed to work until age 60, rather than the present age 55 limit, as long as they are in good physical and mental health and are willing to continue to work, although the earlier retirement option would still be available.

¶15. (SBU) Dr. Thongphan Chanthalanom, Chair of the NA, Women's Parliamentary Caucus (WPC), told Representative McCollum the WPC was established by the NA in 2002. Its focus is gender mainstreaming, studying the rights and benefits of children, and improving the roles of female parliamentarians. The WPC also helps with oversight of social and economic development with a focus on more participation from females. She reiterated that female NA members have played a big role in NA debates on laws on protecting both women and children. Dr. Thongphan pointed out that the NA has received international assistance to help raise the role of female NA members. (Note: this includes a program from the Asia Foundation that is partially USG-funded.)

¶16. (SBU) Representative McCollum emphasized that female legislators "all take our jobs seriously but never forget that we are mothers." Mentioning female parliamentarians she has met all over the world, Representative McCollum pointed out all are strong on defense and understand finance, but they remind their governments by their presence that "to have a strong country you need strong families."

¶17. (SBU) Representative McCollum affirmed to her NA interlocutors that she looked forward to working with them on women's and children's issues, health care, and education. She mentioned she had seen an excellent school with very bright children during her visit to Xiang Khouang Province and described the lesson plan on UXO as "outstanding." Representative McCollum said that opportunities for student exchanges would enrich our bilateral relations.

#### ... Health Care

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¶18. (SBU) Representative McCollum said she also wants to work with other parliamentarians on global health issues as part of meeting UN Millennium Development Goals. Among these, maternal and child health is a priority. Women legislators must do all they can for safer childbirths; "a family that loses its mother loses its heart" (as well as a strong arm for carrying water and firewood). Representative McCollum pointed out she works with NGOs that train women in various countries at the village level on simple interventions which can save women's lives; then the NGO departs, and the women take charge. She also told the NA members that she sees opportunities for our governments to work on training for doctors. As she had outlined for Dr. Koueko in the morning, Representative McCollum highlighted the great expertise of medical doctors attached to our Defense Department in dealing with the heartbreaking injuries caused by UXO. She added, however, that this would not change our commitment to help Laos remove and destroy UXO. Madame Pany thanked Representative McCollum for her concern, noting she was taking care of five children of her own niece and nephew who were killed by UXO while trying to till a new field in Xiang Khouang. Madame Pany expressed hope the House of Representatives would encourage the USG to increase UXO funding.

... The 26 Children

¶ 19. (SBU) Representative McCollum pressed Madame Pany about resolution of the case of the 26 Hmong children (detained in Laos since being irregularly deported by local Thai authorities in December 2005), noting that she understood very intense negotiations were underway to help resolve the case. Cases such as this cause difficulty when the U.S. relationship with Laos is debated in the Congress, she noted.

Madame Pany responded that the Lao President had written to the UN Secretary General (in June 2006 saying that the GOL, in essence, had no information on the location of the children). If the Thais had sent the children to Laos, "we were unaware" she claimed. Madame Pany went on to say "we continue to cooperate with the Thai Parliament to resolve the issue." She concluded by adding that they are urging the Thai government to provide detailed information to the GOL including a list of the children, where they were sent from, and who sent them. "We wait for a response," she asserted.

... ICRC

¶ 20. (SBU) Representative McCollum cited the GOL's program to resettle Hmong people (including insurgents who have surrendered to the GOL and some recently returned from Thailand). Even though there have been many successes, Representative McCollum pointed out, some people still want to make trouble for the GOL. As she worked for more cooperation on UXO, trade, and health care, Representative McCollum said it would be helpful for her if the GOL were to find a "fair third party" such as the ICRC to work with the GOL to monitor the successes of the resettlement program and "put rumors to rest." Representative McCollum cited the work of the ICRC in bringing to light mistreatment of Iraqis held at the Abu Ghraib Prison, which Congress was able to bring to a halt, to demonstrate ICRC's fairness and neutrality. Madame Pany thanked Representative McCollum for her suggestion, noting the two sides already had good diplomatic and trade relations and, "once people see the real situation, then the rumors will be seen as wrong." The real goal for Laos, she argued, is to get Laos off the list of least developed countries, eliminate poverty, and meet the UN Millennium Goals.

Comment

¶ 21. (C) The NA worked hard to help make Representative McCollum's first visit to Laos a success. The NA helped set up meetings with GOL and NA officials, the NA Chief of Cabinet hosted lunch, and NA staff took Representative McCollum on a tour of Vientiane's major cultural monuments. The meetings with Dr. Koueko and Madame Pany were informative about NA issues, and Representative McCollum has promised to return with a delegation of her colleagues to continue to develop Congress-NA relations. Although no amount of international cooperation will turn Laos' legislature into a truly representative body, increased engagement with the U.S. Congress (as well as training by groups such as The Asia Foundation) has the potential to improve the quality of the NA's work, especially its oversight function.

¶ 22. (C) One disappointment, however, was Madame Pany's sidestepping of both the issue of the 26 children as well as Representative McCollum's suggestion about a fair third party such as the ICRC. Pany is a Politburo Member (and ethnic Hmong) and has access to the broadest range of information available on the 26 children. Her unwillingness to even hint at the rumors of ongoing progress, especially to a Member of

Congress that most Lao officials view as very pro-Laos (from Representative McCollum's support for the passage of Normal Trade Relations in 2004), appeared to be a major lost opportunity to project a positive image of a government actively seeking to resolve a year-long problem. In addition, Pany's virtual dismissal of the ICRC suggestion -- her comment in response that when people see the situation themselves the rumors will stop -- apparently indicates a real misunderstanding at least by this Politburo Member about

the image Laos projects abroad regarding its treatment of its Hmong minority.

¶23. (U) Representative McCollum did not have the opportunity to clear this cable.

HASLACH